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MOOSE JAW GROUP PROTECTS SURFACE WATER QUALITY

The Moose Jaw River Watershed Stewards are participating in an Agri-Environmental Group Plan (AEGP) to reduce the impact of agriculture on surface water quality.

An AEGP is a complement to the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) initiative, but it focuses on one specific issue for a geographic area, compared to an EFP that deals with all issues on a farm. In Saskatchewan, watersheds form the geographic basis for the groups.

At the outset of the Moose Jaw River project in January 2006, town hall meetings were hosted and information was collected from the general public to reveal local issues. The issue chosen for the Moose Jaw area was surface water quality.

Participants at the town hall meetings voted on three Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs) on which to focus for the first two years. Wintering site management, riparian site management and erosion control were the issues that were selected.

Specific actions that producers are taking by way of wintering site management include reducing herd density, improving feeding and bedding strategies, and limiting access to watering sites to improve runoff control. The goal is to eliminate water contamination from nutrients and pathogens.

Riparian areas are located immediately surrounding streams, rivers, lakes and wetlands. They are vital to biodiversity because they act as a natural filter to protect surface water bodies. To protect these areas, producers can create vegetative buffer strips, construct cross-fencing, seed the area to native grasses and keep livestock away from the area to prevent surface runoff.

Erosion control is also critical to streams and wetlands, as sediment can cause contamination. Actions considered by the group include restoring eroded water runs, stabilizing stream banks and installing erosion control structures.

Funding to implement BMPs in the watershed is available from the Canada-Saskatchewan Farm Stewardship Program. So far, farmers have implemented more than $850,000 worth of projects in the Moose Jaw River watershed. These projects have been 50 per cent cost-shared with the stewardship program.

An effective communication strategy has been critical to the success of the project, which spans an area of 9,400 square kilometres from Trossachs almost all the way to Central Butte. The outreach has

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included workshops, bulk mail drops and the publication of a 12-page newsletter. "We've had pretty positive comments on the newsletter," said Tammy Myers, Moose Jaw River Watershed Co-ordinator.

Success will be assessed by examining behavioural trends of the area's agricultural producers. "People are changing their practices." said Myers. "There is a cumulative effect when people take ownership of this issue in a specific area. We're all working together to target this issue."

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